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Big Pharma Will Have to Answer to the American People + More

The Defender's Big Pharma Watch delivers the latest headlines related to pharmaceutical companies and their products, including vaccines, drugs, and medical devices and treatments. The views expressed in the below excerpts from other news sources do not necessarily reflect the views of The Defender. Our goal is to provide readers with breaking news that affects human health and the environment.

By The Defender Staff

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Big Pharma Will Have to Answer to the American People

Fox News reported:

> It is no great secret that millions of Americans feel that Congress is more interested in protecting large corporations than looking out for ordinary people. That is never clearer than when we talk about our broken healthcare system, and the outrageous price of prescription drugs in this country.
>
> The truth is, if you ask most Americans — Democrats, Republicans, independents, progressives, conservatives — they will agree: we are getting ripped off, big time, by the pharmaceutical industry.
>
> As a nation, we spend almost twice as much per capita as any other country on healthcare — over $13,000 for every man, woman and child. Even for those with insurance, costs are so high that medical bills are often the number one cause of bankruptcy in the United States.
>
> And one of the major reasons for the high cost of healthcare in America is that we pay, by far, the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs. You tell me: why does Merck charge diabetes patients in the United States $6,900 for Januvia when the exact same product can be purchased in Canada for $900 and just $200 in France?

GSK Posts Blowout RSV Vaccine Sales, Raises Outlook as Shots Give Big Pharma a Boost

CNBC reported:

> GlaxoSmithKline on Wednesday lifted its long-term outlook following the smash-hit launch of its new RSV vaccine.
>
> The shot targeting the severe and in some cases life-threatening virus booked around £1.2 billion, or $1.5 billion, in sales after only being on the market for roughly half a year.
>
> GSK in November had forecast 2023 sales for the shot, Arexvy, between £900 million and £1 billion, following its strong launch in the U.S. The launch of the first-ever vaccines targeting respiratory syncytial virus from GSK and Pfizer last year has proved to be a boon for both companies — though Pfizer saw fewer sales from its shot than its competitor did.
>
> With $1.5 billion in sales last year, Arexvy is now a "blockbuster" vaccine, which is when a product rakes in annual sales of at least $1 billion. Pfizer's shot, known as Abrysvo, took in about $890 million in sales last year after its launch, the company announced Tuesday. Meanwhile, biotech company Moderna hopes to launch its own RSV vaccine this year.

The U.S. Uses Endangered Monkeys to Test Drugs. This Law Could Free Them.

Vox reported:

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These playful, fruit-loving monkeys have the misfortune of being a standard research model used for toxicology testing in the biomedical industry. In recent years, exporters based largely in their native range of Southeast Asia have sold more than 30,000 long-tailed macaques annually to the U.S., largely for laboratory use.

Biomedical industry demand for long-tailed macaques is so high that, analysts reported last year, a single animal could be sold for as much as $60,000. On arrival at pharmaceutical companies and research institutions, they're destined to live in cages and face experimentation to test everything from the weight-loss drug Ozempic to COVID-19 vaccines.

Then last April, amid growing concerns about the species, a coalition of animal rights activists, conservation groups, and scientists led by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) petitioned the federal government to list the long-tailed macaque under the Endangered Species Act.

This could have radical implications: If successful, their call might not only end imports of long-tailed macaques but also help address the physical and psychological distress they face in U.S. testing labs and perhaps even end their use in research altogether. And it could do that for all members of the species — whether they were abducted from the wild or have lived their whole lives in a cage.

Fentanyl State of Emergency Declared in Downtown Portland, Oregon

Associated Press reported:

Several elected leaders in Oregon declared a state of emergency on Tuesday for downtown Portland over the public health and public safety crisis fueled by fentanyl.

Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler and Multnomah County Chair Jessica Vega Pederson made the declaration for a 90-day period during which collaboration and response will come from a command center downtown.

The three governments are directing their agencies to work with first responders in connecting people addicted to the synthetic opioid with resources including drug treatment programs and to crack down on drug sales.

"Our country and our state have never seen a drug this deadly addictive, and all are grappling with how to respond," Kotek said in a statement.

DNA Particles That Mimic Viruses Hold Promise as Vaccines

MIT News reported:

Using a virus-like delivery particle made from DNA, researchers from MIT and the Ragon Institute of MGH, MIT, and Harvard have created a vaccine that can induce a strong antibody response against SARS-CoV-2.

The vaccine, which has been tested in mice, consists of a DNA scaffold that carries many copies of a viral antigen. This type of vaccine, known as a particulate vaccine, mimics the structure of a virus. Most previous work on particulate vaccines has relied on protein scaffolds, but the proteins used in those vaccines tend to generate an unnecessary immune response that can distract the immune system from the target.

This approach, which strongly stimulates B cells (the cells that produce antibodies), could make it easier to develop vaccines against viruses that have been difficult to target, including HIV and influenza, as well as SARS-CoV-2, the researchers say. Unlike T cells, which are stimulated by other types of vaccines, these B cells can persist for decades, offering long-term protection.

ADHD Medication Recalled Because Bottles May Contain Completely Different Drug

CBS News reported:

Azurity Pharmaceuticals is recalling some of its ADHD and narcolepsy medication because packages of the drug may contain the wrong pills.

The drugmaker said in a recent recall notice that it is calling back one lot of Zenzedi 30 mg with lot number F230169A and an expiration date of June 2025. The product is being pulled from shelves after a pharmacist found an antihistamine called carbinoxamine maleate in a package of Zenzedi, the company said.

The two medications have opposite effects: carbinoxamine maleate, an antihistamine which is used to treat allergies, has a sedative effect on some patients, whereas dextroamphetamine sulfate is a stimulant that generally increases users' attentiveness, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Zenzedi patients who have received the wrong medicine have a higher risk of getting into accidents and injuring themselves, as well as being more likely to experience drowsiness and depression, increased eye pressure and thyroid disorders, according to Azurity's announcement.

Pfizer Beats Earnings Estimates as Declining COVID Business Loses Less Revenue Than Expected

CNBC reported:

Pfizer on Tuesday posted a surprise adjusted fourth-quarter profit, as the company's declining COVID business loss less revenue than expected.

The company reversed roughly $3.5 billion in revenue related to the expected return of 6.5 million doses of its COVID drug, Paxlovid, from the U.S. government. That hit is less than the $4.2 billion Pfizer initially expected for the return of nearly 8 million doses of Paxlovid.

Pfizer's COVID vaccine raked in $5.36 billion in revenue for the quarter, down 53% from the same period last year. Analysts had expected the shot to bring in $4.99 billion in sales, according to FactSet estimates.

The results come as Pfizer tries to blunt the rapid decline of its COVID business, which saw demand plummet to new lows and transitioned to the commercial market in the U.S. last year. As revenue suffers, the company is trying to improve its bottom line and boost investor confidence through a broad $4 billion cost-cutting plan.

John Rich's Travis Kelce Message Sparks Debate

Newsweek reported:

John Rich's post about Travis Kelce has sparked debate on social media after the country music star mocked the Kansas City Chiefs' tight end and his promotional campaign with Pfizer.

"Are you sick of Travis Kelce telling you to get the experimental jab every time you turn on the TV?" Rich asked his 1 million followers in a January 27 poll on X, formerly Twitter. The singer-songwriter is a known vaccine skeptic, with some users applauding his dig at Kelce. Newsweek has reached out to John Rich and Travis Kelce for comment via email.

Out of the more than 17,000 people who voted, 95% picked, "YES. Stop the madness!" while 5% chose, "No. More jabs please."

Kelce announced the paid partnership with Pfizer in September. The 34-year-old shared a video to his Instagram account, where he advised viewers to get their flu shot alongside their COVID-19 vaccine booster.

This isn't the first time Rich has taken aim at Pfizer, which produces one of the two mRNA vaccines used to fight COVID-19. The 50-year-old hit out at the pharmaceutical company in June, following unsupported rumors that Jamie Foxx had been left paralyzed and blind by the vaccine.

Obesity Drug Boom Pushes Novo Nordisk Shares to Record High

The Guardian reported:

Novo Nordisk shares hit a record high after the Danish company reported soaring sales of its obesity and diabetes drugs Wegovy and Ozempic, pushing its market value past $500 billion and cementing its position as Europe's most valuable company.

Novo Nordisk shares rose by 4% on Wednesday before settling to trade 1.2% higher, leaving its market value hovering near $500bn (£394bn). The obesity drug boom has turned the drugmaker into Europe's most valuable company, ahead of France's luxury goods group LVMH, with a market value of $422bn.

The new generation of weight loss drugs, which also include the U.S. drugmaker Eli Lilly's Mounjaro, sold as Zepbound, mimic the action of a gut hormone called GLP-1 by suppressing appetite and slowing the movement of food through the digestive system.

They have helped many people lose significant amounts of weight but can cause side effects ranging from nausea, bloating, diarrhea and fatigue to more serious stomach, kidney and gallbladder problems and inflammation of the pancreas.

Decades-Old Human Growth Hormone Treatments Linked to Five Cases of Early Alzheimer's

NBC News reported:

Five patients in the United Kingdom have developed Alzheimer's disease that appears to be the result of contaminated injections they received as children decades ago, according to a new study that could change the way scientists think about the causes of dementia — and cause anxiety in patients who underwent the same therapy.

All five patients received injections of human growth hormone from cadavers for several years as a treatment for very short stature, according to the study, which was published Monday in the journal Nature Medicine. Scientists extracted the hormone from the cadavers' pituitary glands, located at the base of the brain.

What the scientists didn't realize at the time, however, was that in some cases, another substance was extracted as well, contaminating the batches: amyloid-beta protein. This protein is involved in the formation of the hallmark brain plaques seen in Alzheimer's. Researchers said they can't fully explain how being exposed to these proteins could trigger the creation of plaques and tangles in the brain that cause Alzheimer's disease.

"This is new information that is not known by the medical community," said Dr. Kupper Wintergerst, who chairs the American Academy of Pediatrics' section on endocrinology.

Cadaver-derived growth hormone was given to 27,000 children worldwide from 1959 to 1985, according to the new study, including about 7,700 patients in the United States. Doctors used hormones taken from cadavers before a synthetic version became available.

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